SPC Tom Mund

SGT Casey Vanover and his team practice entering and righting a Zodiac boat in a river near Darmstadt, Germany.

FORWARD EYES AND EARS

Story by Heike Hasenauer

AT a time when international attention is focused on the United States' political and military response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on America — and gathering and safeguarding intelligence are vital to security — the mission of the 165th Military Intelligence Battalion takes on renewed significance.

"Most of the unit's soldiers are tactical counterintelligence agents," said battalion executive officer MAJ William Pfeffer.

Headquartered in Darmstadt, Germany, the 165th is one of only two such units in the active Army, Pfeffer said. The other is part of XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, N.C.

A critical component of the battalion is Company E — its airborne, long-range reconnaissance unit.

The company's soldiers, who are dropped into an area ahead of ground troops, can infiltrate as much as 100 kilometers into enemy territory at night and conduct reconnaissance and surveillance while remaining undetected, Pfeffer said.

While other infantry soldiers are manning checkpoints and performing peacekeeping operations, "We're doing long-range reconnaissance," said CPT Scott Nelson, the company commander. "The difference between us and special forces is that they have a variety of missions. We do recon and surveillance only."

SGT Mike Yates

LRS team radio operator SPC Dennis Moore blends into his surroundings during a practice mission.

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Soldiers in the unit carry 85- to 100-pound rucksacks, and their gear includes satellite communication systems, high-frequency radios, long-distance optical equipment, Global Positioning System units, video cameras to record "named area of interest" target images, and a basic load of ammunition, including grenades.

The company's 18 six-member teams are "the eyes and ears" of V Corps in Germany, Pfeffer said.

In Kosovo, they were inserted by Humvee or helicopter in the "hinterlands," near the borders of Macedonia and Serbia. The company has been deployed on a rotating basis in the Balkans since 1996, Nelson said.

"Initially, we sent 12 to 15 teams through Albania into Kosovo with the 1st Infantry Division," he added. "The only LRS people who accompanied 1st Inf. Div. soldiers into Kosovo after the air war were soldiers from one of our LRS platoons."

The Kosovo deployment was the best thing that has happened to his company in a long time, said Nelson. "It validated our mission." Four to five teams operated per platoon, with two or three teams conducting each mission set.

From Camp Bondsteel, the unit's base camp, six-man teams trekked through the woods, typically for 72 to 96 hours. After 96 hours, if everything went according to plan, UH-60 Black Hawks or Humvees returned to extract the teams.

"Our 'fight' is to go into whatever areas are deemed 'black holes' of information by a task-force commander," Nelson said.

LRS team leader SSG David Clark said targets could include such things as a ridgeline with an avenue of approach — where supplies would have to be hauled by donkey — a crossroad, or a house occupied by people suspected of hostile activity.

A mission begins with a warning order and is followed about 12 hours later by an operations order. At this point, teams spend about 62 hours in an isolation facility, doing detailed planning. After 62 hours, they get the OK to move out. In Kosovo, that

SPC Tom Mund

LRS team member SGT Jamie Phillips helocasts from a hovering UH-60 into a river near Bamberg, Germany.

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LRS soldiers leap from a CH-47 during Zodiac-boat training near Bamberg. The Chinook is a common mode of transport for LRS teams.

meant boarding Black Hawks late at night for an insertion.

Teams moved to wood lines, began patrolling, and moved to areas about one to three kilometers from their target.

They gathered critical intelligence information on subversive activity involving both ethnic Albanians and Serbs, Nelson said. "It didn't matter who was doing it, our mission was to uncover any activity that countered the KFOR mission."

The teams confirmed the presence of illegal-arms trafficking and military activity inside the ground-security zone, Nelson said. In other potentially hostile areas, they could confirm or deny guerilla training.

"A lot of the guys are 18 and 19 years old," Clark said. And they have to know how to operate high-frequency radios, satellite communications and optical equipment, be able to identify enemy vehicles and uniforms, and have an understanding of enemy orders of battle.

A ranger-qualified staff sergeant leads an LRS team, which includes a radio operator that allows the team to communicate over long distances — such as from Europe to the United States, Nelson said.

Clark, who has been on a few missions in Kosovo, was largely responsible for the success of those missions. He was provided guidelines, but was the principal planner for each mission. Planning what to do if the team's location is compromised is part of the plan.

Wherever they go — because they're an advance element of a military force — the LRS teams often see and hear gunfire in their vicinity.

"Once, in the Balkans, my team was compromised by a herd of cows that walked right into our position," Clark said. "The white pepper we had to throw at them didn't chase them off, and a cow stepped right on one of our guys." Because a farmer in the area spotted the soldier, the team had to be extracted.

Herds of cattle actually pose a frequent danger, Clark said, because they roam around just about everywhere. "We're more likely to be compromised by animals than by people, because animals can smell us."

An exception was when a group of high school students who were picking mushrooms stumbled on one of the teams, said SGT Sean Lumsden, an assistant team leader.

Much of what the LRS teams do simply requires common sense, Clark said. "We don't walk across freshly plowed fields that will be worked the next day, for example, especially when a lot of the area's inhabitants don't wear shoes. And, when we look for hiding places, it's easier to hide three-man groups than six-man groups."

"You pick an area after asking yourself, 'If I were the enemy, would I want to go there, walk there?'" Lumsden said. "If the answer's 'no,' that's where you go."

Wherever they go — because they're an advance element of a military force — the LRS teams often see and hear gunfire in their vicinity, Clark said. "It's not uncommon for us to have rounds going off near our positions. It's sort of like having Super Bowl tickets and just watching instead of getting involved."

A critical intelligence-gathering asset for the Army, LRS teams penetrate enemy lines to help provide commanders with reliable information that can alter the course of battle — or a peacekeeping mission — and mean the difference between success and failure. □